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U.S. ASSERTS PLANE FLED LIBYAN JETS

**'Eavesdropping' Transport
Ignored Arabs' Signal to
Land, Officials Assert**

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WASHINGTON, March 22—Nixon Administration officials reported today that the American military transport plane that was fired on over the Mediterranean yesterday had ignored a signal from two Libyan fighters to land and was instead taking evasive action.

The officials also said that the transport, a C-130, was on a communications eavesdropping mission at the time about 75 miles off the Libyan coast.

The incident, they reported, has brought a stern protest from the United States and could lead to the assignment of fighter-escorts on future missions in the area.

They also reported that the Libyan planes, both said to have been French-made Mirages, had been guided to the interception point by air controllers in Tripoli and had been given a specific command to fire at the transport after visual contact was made.

It was not clear, however, whether the fighter pilots had reported that the plane had United States markings.

What was clear, the sources

said, was that one of the Libyan pilots identified the plane as a transport rather than as a fighter and was ordered to fire. The transport wasn't hit.

Officially, spokesman for both the State and Defense Departments provided few specific details today about the encounter. At both places, spokesmen would say only that the transport, out of Athens, was on a "military mission" and never got closer than 75 miles to the Libyan coast. Libya says that her jurisdiction extends 12 miles from the shore.

Protest, but No Reply

Charles W. Bray 3d, the State Department spokesman, said the United States chargé d'affaires in Tripoli had delivered a protest message, but that there was no immediate response.

If the response is unsatisfactory, a Pentagon official said, fighter escorts probably will accompany future missions, as they did in the spring of 1969 after an EC-121 eavesdropping plane was shot down off the coast of North Korea.

As pieced together from sources throughout the Government, this appears to be the sequence of events:

The four-engine C-130 equipped with special listening equipment, tape recorders and language specialists, took off from the military airport in Athens in the early morning and headed out on a swing well off the coasts of Egypt and Libya. Such flights are common.

Shortly after reaching air space covered by the Libyan radar, a language specialist aboard the plane heard messages from Tripoli air controllers putting fighters on a course to intercept the plane.

A Beckoning Signal

When the two mirages came into view, they wagged their wings and veered toward land—the internationally-recognized sign, "follow me and land." Israeli pilots reportedly used similar signals over the Sinai peninsula on Feb. 22, trying to get a Libyan airliner to land. It was subsequently shot down and 108 were killed in the crash-landing.

The C-130 was then about 82 miles from the Libyan coast. Rather than obey the order, the pilot turned toward cloud cover to get away.

Intercepted radio traffic indicates that the fighter pilots were told that if the plane was a fighter, they should fire at it. When they passed the word back that it was a transport, they reportedly were told to fire anyway.

There was a long burst of cannon fire from one or both of the jets as they took up pursuit. A few minutes later, they spotted the transport again, this time more than 100 miles off shore, but it took evasive action into clouds and returned to Athens without suffering damage.

No Missiles Believed Fired

The Mirages were presumably short of fuel then, and they returned to their base. Although a Mirage normally carries heat-seeking, air-to-air missiles, none were thought to have been fired.

Fewer than 100 rounds of machine gun fire were believed shot at the transport, from a range of about 100 yards. Officials discount the notion that these were only warning shots because of the radio command to shoot at the transport.

Officials were generally unwilling to speculate on the motive for the incident. At the State Department, Mr. Bray said that the C-130's mission had had no connection with any attempt to find out what Libya was up to as a result of last month's downing of her airliner.

At the Pentagon, Jerry W. Friedheim, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said that the C-130 had normal United States Air Force markings, and was painted in the brown and olive green camouflage common to such military aircraft.

In no way did it resemble an airliner, he said. Other sources said there had been no known effort on the part of the Libyan pilots to make voice contact with the transport.